

## VOICES

A FORUM FOR COMMUNITY ISSUES

# Plight of Kids Without Homes

By RUTH SCHWARTZ  
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In Los Angeles, there are more than 8,000 children who are homeless every night, living with their families in emergency shelters, transient hotels, sometimes sleeping in their cars, or, if they are lucky, sleeping for a few days at a time on the floors of family and friends. The majority of families that become homeless are headed by single mothers, surviving on incomes as low as \$600 per month for a family of four if the parent is unemployed to about \$900 per month if the parent is working. Many families must pay for both housing and food with even less monthly income.

Homeless families are generally "invisible" to the public. Their numbers are growing, however, faster than the homeless single people we see every day on the streets. In Los Angeles, the high cost of housing, coupled with declining real incomes of the very poor, have resulted over the last few years in an epidemic of family homelessness, causing formerly stable families to lose their livelihoods, their connections to community and ultimately the places where they lived. As a result, the current emergency shelter system — with about 2,500 beds for families — is stretched well beyond its capacity.

Until last month, the most viable way out of homelessness for

families has been the Section 8 housing voucher program, created and funded by the federal government under President Nixon in the 1970s. As a result of local leadership over the past decade, more than 6,000 homeless families and disabled individuals in the city of Los Angeles alone have been able to secure permanent, affordable housing, for which they pay about 30% of their income for rent.

With help from a network of dedicated nonprofit agencies, whose goal has been to end family homelessness in Los Angeles, families have been able to move back into neighborhoods and communities, where children can enroll in school and parents can begin the process of rebuilding their lives.

A confluence of new federal laws and a change in local housing market conditions, as well as a two-year hiatus in federal funding, have resulted in "suspension" from the program for more than 1,500 very low-income families that have been approved for Section 8 subsidies but have not yet signed rental contracts. Of these, 400 are homeless families with children and disabled individuals, who now have few options.

At the same time, thousands of other families no longer have a viable way out of homelessness. As a result, because families are unable to leave shelters, newly

homeless families are unable to get in. The result is the near exhaustion of the homeless service system.

The high cost of housing will come as a surprise to many. Rental rates now surpass the mortgage payments of many people who have owned their own homes for years. Rents for a one-bedroom apartment in a working-class neighborhood are \$700 a month; a two-bedroom apartment rents for \$1,000 a month, far exceeding the income of the very poor.

As a result, many low-income families are paying up to 80% or more of their income on rent alone, roughly triple the proportion that the federal government deems affordable. Other families are "doubling-up" in overcrowded conditions or living in uninhabitable situations, including illegally converted garages. Some of these families eventually become homeless or are forced to sacrifice other subsistence needs.

And the future looks even bleaker for low-income families in Los Angeles. The president's 2005 budget proposes to target the subsidies to people with higher incomes and reduce the funding by more than \$1 billion. In Los Angeles alone, this action would result in more than 5,000 families that currently receive Section 8 assistance losing their homes, and an addi-

tional 15,000 families would lose their homes in the next five years.

Community leaders, including Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn and members of the City Council, have appealed to the federal government for immediate assistance, requesting that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development use existing reserves to alleviate the immediate problem. Though this may eventually help the 1,500 families whose vouchers have been suspended, it does not address the impending crisis.

If we do not take action at all levels and in every sector, homeless families will no longer be "invisible," for those with nowhere else to go will end up on the streets.

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